

## Bible Sunday – 27<sup>th</sup> October 2019

Today is Bible Sunday

So here's a little potted history.... The King James Bible celebrated its 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of being in print in 2011, but I believe there was an Anglo-Saxon translation – of the New Testament at least – as early as AD995.

Prior to that, the first copy of scripture – in Latin was produced in 382AD.

A man called Wycliffe was the first person to produce a hand-written manuscript copy of the complete Bible in 1384 and with the invention of the printing press some 70 years later by Gutenberg came mass-production of the Book – still produced in Latin.

But in 1526, William Tyndale's New Testament was printed in the vernacular – in the English Language – the first of the Reformation translations. Tyndale and his contemporaries were shaping the course of Church History through their revolutionary and reformative thinking and action in breaking down the corrupted barriers that had been built between the people and their God over the years.

It was trouble for the Church of course, because once people had access to scripture, they realised that much of the organisation and teaching of the church was not even mentioned in the Bible. In the end, Tyndale was betrayed and burnt at the stake on 6 October 1536. Ironically it was only three years later, following his fall-out with Rome, that Henry VIII ordered that there should be an English Bible in every Church.

Moving from the interpretation of *words* to reflect upon the interpretation of the *Word* – God's Word, revealed through the Scriptures.

St Augustine, felt correct interpretation of the Old Testament could not be found purely on a historical level. He said that 'The New Testament is hidden in the Old and the Old is made *accessible* by the New'. (*i.e. Isa 61 – The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.....*)

By the middle-ages, people began to look at scripture in a fuller way – looking at its literal meaning – looking at what it meant in terms of Christian morality – belief – what it called Christians to do – and what they could hope for.

Move on a few hundred years, under the influence of the Enlightenment, where emphasis was put on human reason, and thinking became more rational and scientific - biblical interpretation became dryer - losing much of its mystery and wonder, and parts of scripture were treated as supernatural fiction.

And then the Victorians – who began to look more closely at areas of social justice issues. Turning to scripture for Christian understanding for that day, they began to embark on

rallying for social reform, with much of the good work in inner cities being carried out through what were known as 'slum churches' - elaborately ordained churches where the poor could escape the drudgery of life and be elevated into the beauty and mystery of a heavenly world through worship.

It was the great 10<sup>th</sup> century theologian Anselm of Canterbury, who said that theology was '*faith seeking understanding*' – he really understood that intellectual exploration of Christian faith – through studying the scriptures and seeing what they were saying to us in our daily lives - could walk hand-in-hand, and enrich, our practical working out of faith and spirituality on the ground, through preaching, ministry and pastoral care.

In recent years, it seems as though we are being called back to seek the beauty and comfort and hope that is embedded within the divine Word of God. We are discovering that the 'made-to-measure human' God created through modernity's culture of individualism, consumerism and 'quick-fix' solutions - devoid of any spiritual nourishment - can only lead to meaningless lives.

Bible scripture is deeply embedded into our everyday lives - sometimes even when we are not looking! In actual fact, even those who do not class themselves as 'religious' use the Word of God more than they know!

How about "I escaped by the skin of my teeth"! – Read: "All my intimate friends detest me....I am nothing but skin and bone. I have escaped with only the skin of my teeth." Job 19: 19-20

Or "Eat, drink and be merry" – "And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry." Luke 12:19

Or how about "At my wits end" – "they reeled and staggered like drunkards, and were at their wits end". Ps 107:27

There are hundreds of them! "The Straight and Narrow" Matt 7:14 – "A man after his own heart" 1 Samuel 13:14 – "Pride comes before a fall" Proverbs 16:18 – "Apple of his eye" Deuteronomy 32:10 – "Writing on the wall" Daniel 5:5 – "Turn the other cheek" Matt 5:39 – and so it goes on....

I know quite a few people who would be most surprised (and perhaps horrified) to think they were going around quoting 'bible and verse'!

And What about Scripture and worship. Each week we come together in worship, and hear the Word through our spoken liturgy, through singing and through prayer. We have been given booklets today showing just how much of our order of service is rooted in scripture. So what about our individual spiritual growth through the Bible?

Well, we can find comfort and meaning in biblical imagery. For instance, 'The Feast'. Jesus frequently compared the Kingdom of God to a great banquet. It conjures up images of

being wanted, invited and welcomed by Jesus to join the great celebration of God's love for us. Indeed, the Blessed Eucharist is rooted in this whole wonder of being invited to God's Holy table to receive spiritual nourishment and hope through the sharing of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

We have great journey imagery in scripture - such as Abraham's journey to Canaan, the wandering of the people of Israel, or the great missionary journey of Paul. Indeed, the greatest journey of all is that of Jesus, as he fulfilled the promise of the new covenant and linked together the Old and the New Testament through his life, death and resurrection.

And through pondering, meditating and praying around scripture, we can see our own lives as a journey and can relate to the early Christians as they followed 'the way'.

We can reflect upon the stories of Exile – of feeling lost - the stories of internal and external struggle between God and the world.

In times of loneliness and a sense of separation, we can relate to the 'desert' stories in the Bible such as Jesus' own struggle as he overcame temptation in the wilderness.

We can turn to them and let them speak to us in comfort and hope and promise...

We have so much to be grateful for to those pioneering reformists like Tyndale – who were so passionate in trying to bring about the opportunity for everyone to have access to the Bible.

But in some places today in Western society – you can't even give them away – folk have moved right away from any divine connection through scripture - thinking that the answer to it all lies in this or that, and everything becoming more and more shallower and everyone getting more and more unhappy and lost in the process – many not even remotely thinking that there might be another way -

But in the meantime - people in Eastern Europe (historically), Asia, Africa, the middle east are dying – as we know - or driven underground for fear of their lives in order to practice their faith – and probably desperate for a bible or even a scrap of scripture taken from a book or written down by someone else, just so as to have some words of inspiration and hope to cling on to.

So, as we sit here on Bible Sunday, enjoying freely our fellowship, our worship and our love of Jesus, we have much to rejoice and be grateful for. Not only do we have a physical freedom to be here, but we also have a spiritual freedom that, in a measure, we have been released from the things of this world enough – through the Grace of God – to be willing to want to be at Church on a Sunday morning, and to be receptive to being uplifted and inspired through the Word of our faith.

It's not so many years ago when I was one of those people in the dark. But I remember vividly the moment when something urged me to consciously open the Bible. How moved I

was to find on the very first page the words 'So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them' male and female he created them.' I had vaguely seen them before of course, but this time, God had brought them to life through revelation – it was my time to see and at last, I had begun to get a sense of who I was. I wonder how it happened for you – when you began to realise you were part of God's amazing story of life?

That experience can happen to anyone – at any time...God is full of surprises...

And that's why it's a privilege and a duty really – for us of faith in God's word – no matter how great or small – to reach out in some way that works for us – to encourage others to just take a look – be open – so that the Word of the Bible can be made flesh for them too – can be brought alive in their hearts – so that life journeys and experiences can be nourished, strengthened, and given meaning and purpose through a sense of being rooted in God's love for his creation and God's love for his creatures ... for us all... No intention to share God's love is too small, silly or insignificant...

So as we thank God for his Word through the Holy Bible, we remember that John tells us, God is the Word, the Word made flesh through Jesus Christ, who shines a light on the darkness, on the spiritual darkness of our lives and who works with us through Sacrament, Spirit and Word to move us into the light of God's love and the hopeful promise of God's kingdom.

What greater gift can there be? Amen

Revd Jacqueline Drake-Smith, October 2019